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Hearing before Appropriations, Human Services and Energy & Technology Committees (Regarding the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) Block Grant)

Testimony of Wendy W. Wanchak
(Connecticut Legal Services Attorney and
Member, Low Income Energy Advisory Board)

September 3, 2015

Recommended Action:

**Support LIHEAP Block Grant
plan as drafted.**

Connecticut Legal Services assists low income households in Connecticut by providing legal advice and services in civil matters. These households are our vulnerable neighbors most at risk of being unable to afford and maintain necessary utility and energy services, as well as other basic needs such as housing, food and medicine.

Connecticut's LIHEAP Block Grant benefits are the primary source of energy affordability assistance in this State but help with only about 11% of the seventy million dollars (\$70,000,000) that vulnerable households are unable to pay for their home energy annually. *

Connecticut households pay among the highest rates for utilities in the country, rates are ever increasing, and the energy affordability "gap" among at least 300,000** households in this State has widened into a chasm.

With the 2015/2016 LIHEAP Block Grant Plan the Department of Social Services has done the best job it can to administer and allocate what LIHEAP federal dollars it does receive and to maximize the amount of the assistance for low income households. The Department has also solicited and incorporated recommendations from the State's Low Income Energy Assistance Advisory Board (LIEAB) and kept LIEAB well informed about utilization statistics and other program information.

* Home Energy Affordability Gap: CT (2013) Report, prepared by Roger D. Colton of Fisher, Sheehan & Colton, Public Finance and General Economics, Belmont, MA (prepared for Operation Fuel)

** Id.



In particular, the proposed plan has been able to slightly increase the crisis assistance and rental assistance benefits, and has increased the amount of liquid assets a household may have and still be eligible for energy assistance. In addition, re-establishing funding to repair or replace certain unsafe or inoperable heating systems in single family, owner occupied dwellings will help households in desperate need at desperate times.

Despite the efforts of DSS to administer the block grant, the LIHEAP dollars remain grossly inadequate to protect thousands of households from unheated and under-heated homes, and utility shut-offs..

And because it appears that funding for LIHEAP has plateaued creative solutions for desperate times are needed.

For years, coordination between the DSS and utility companies to protect Connecticut's poorest and most vulnerable households has been encouraged. Specifically, we once again recommend that DSS be required to modify its applications for DSS benefit programs and benefits redetermination forms to include a section for applicants to authorize DSS to electronically transfer to the utilities information about households who automatically qualify for protection from dangerous winter utility shut-offs and who may be eligible for additional consumer protections and services.

This is simply a matter of good government policy coordination. It enables access to protections for most vulnerable households, disproportionately disabled or suffering from competency or literacy issues or life stresses that make it difficult for them to access available protections on their own.

With information provided to the utilities by DSS the utilities could:

- Ensure that these households are automatically coded to prevent dangerous winter utility shut-offs;
- Provide automatic priority access to free energy conservation assistance under the programs in the Energy Efficiency Fund (CGS Sec. 26-245m);
- Be targeted for energy assistance reminders; and,
- Be provided information on special payment reminders including matching payment programs.

With DSS able to obtain authorization from vulnerable households on its own eligibility forms and with recent upgrades to the DSS computer systems, any obstacle to instituting this sharing of information can be eliminated.

It is a fact in this State that energy costs for the poor continue to go up and affordability continues to decrease. It is therefore imperative that low income households be connected to as many resources as possible.